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A sound education: using podcasts to develop study skills



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INTRODUCTION

Coping with the demands of academic study at university level can be a challenging experience for many students, and effective study skills are crucial in achieving academic success. However, librarians and teachers in higher education will know that it is not always easy to engage students in developing their study skills. How can we find new ways of stimulating the interest of our students? An innovative approach to teaching and the exploitation of new technologies can provide solutions and ideas. Podcasting has been very popular in recent years for delivering entertainment, news and other information, but podcasts are also extensively used in education, enabling students to watch or listen at a time that suits them – at home, at work or while travelling.

The *Skills for learning*¹ website was established over ten years ago as part of the library service at Leeds Metropolitan University to support the teaching and learning of study skills. The website offers students a wide range of resources including topics such as academic writing, time

management, group skills, reflection and how to do research. There is also a team of tutors who provide workshops and tutorials.

We felt that a podcast series could provide an alternative and flexible way of delivering study skills support that might appeal to a new audience. The podcasts could also be used as a stimulus in classroom teaching. As they are usually released episodically, we hoped that subscribers or visitors to our podcast page would become 'hooked' on the series and want to tune in to future podcasts. All the podcasts were created in-house by members of the *Skills for learning* team.

PLANNING THE PODCASTS

The team were familiar with the 'listen again' podcasts of radio programmes, mostly from using the BBC website. The Radio 4 interview or panel type of discussion was our main starting point for inspiration. For further ideas, we were lucky in that our learning technologist is an enthusiast of the whole range of web technologies and a keen follower of podcasts. Most of these are not 'broadcast' in the traditional sense and many are much shorter than the usual radio fare. To allow us to consider all the options we decided to have an open-ended planning meeting where we could pool ideas, listen to a range of podcasts and come up with a plan for producing our own.

One of the most interesting podcasts we were introduced to at this meeting was the 'Skeptics' guide to the universe' series². In these five-minute podcasts, five scientists consider '...news in the world of science and pseudoscience'. We listened carefully to a number of their programmes and analysed some of the main features. These were:

- one person chairs the discussion
- chairperson provides a brief introduction and outline of the topic
- a second person requests clarification – the chair responds with information and statistics
- the other 'experts' chip in to introduce other aspects of the topic and to give further details
- discussions sound spontaneous, though the factual content is rigorously accurate.

A considerable amount of information can be provided in just five minutes of audio, and we were enthused by the possibilities of this new method of presenting advice to our students. We already had a wish-list of potential topics, so we split into

small working groups to plan and record some podcasts on them. Each group had one or two staff with a particular area of expertise, but we also needed people with less knowledge of the topics to act as questioners.

At the outset most of us imagined that we would prepare a script for each podcast and work from that. However, our analysis of the 'Skeptics' guide' series, coupled with our existing knowledge of radio programmes, convinced us that scripting was probably not helpful if we wanted to produce something that sounded authentic. At about this time, and by coincidence, some visitors from another university told us about their experience of producing podcasts on library skills. Although they had expended much staff time and effort in writing scripts, they said that what they eventually produced sounded staged and stilted. This confirmed our idea that, although we would produce a content outline for each podcast, we would not write our 'lines'. Our initial three topics were plagiarism, essay writing and data analysis.

MAKING THE PODCASTS

Our learning technologist was present at all the recording sessions, taking a questioner role at one of them, and he reported finding the different approaches of each group highly interesting (and amusing). We quickly found that it was all right to experiment as it was easy to simply re-record if the discussion stalled or there were too many 'fluffs'. The initial stage-fright of some gave way to increased confidence and a determination to produce something worthwhile.

Our first three topics were produced as panel discussions. We also simulated tutorial sessions. For example, our maths tutor answered questions from two *Skills for learning* team members who adopted roles as students. The staff involved certainly learnt a great deal about quantitative data analysis and the Likert scale! It was easier for us to use staff to pose typical questions as real students were obviously reluctant to have their private tutorials made into public podcasts. It would also have been harder to control the content to ensure inclusion of target topics and the right level of generic relevance. We trusted in the non-scripted approach to ensure an authentic feel to the recording.

We experimented with two other approaches. These were conversations (or interviews) between two people, and recordings of students in discussion. Students were recorded for the podcast on

'time management'³. As there is no shortage of general advice on this topic, we decided to take advantage of the quick and easy recorder to get a 'real life' angle. We approached students in the university dining area – but only after they had eaten and if they were looking relaxed. Quite a few groups were happy to talk to us about their own experiences and we managed to get a good cross-section of students – full time undergraduates, students taking professional qualifications and mature part-timers. They told us about their problems with balancing work, study, social life and family commitments, as well as offering their solutions and tips for new students. Pulling it all together with a small amount of commentary was an interesting exercise. For example, our 'top tips' had to be re-recorded because we felt that the points needed numbering in order to make aural comprehension easier.

TECHNOLOGY

The recording equipment used was an Edirol R-09HR recorder, a small battery-operated device which looks a little like an electric shaver and fits in the palm of the hand; it allows recording audio direct to SD memory card from the built-in microphone. The device is a professional, high-definition recorder that is highly suited for voice recording.

Most podcast recordings were made in university offices with a reasonable recording ambience and fairly quiet surroundings to allow the best audio quality. Wherever possible a short recording of a spoken voice was made first, to ensure that recording levels were set appropriately. During recording the device was usually placed equidistant from all participants. On completion of recording, the audio files were transferred from the device to a computer. The recorder comes equipped with a USB cable and appears as a mass storage device when switched on and attached to a PC or Mac computer, allowing it to be accessed and navigated in the same way as a USB flash drive and enabling the user to copy, move and delete files.

'Audacity' (a free, open-source, cross-platform digital audio-editing program) was used to edit the audio files. This software allows the user to cut, copy, splice and mix sounds from multiple sources, control the timing and volume of all the audio elements and remove unwanted background noise, static noise or pops by applying a number of effects to the audio. We set the Edirol device to record in WAV audio format; these are

large high quality files equivalent to CD in quality sound. After editing we exported them from Audacity to the considerably smaller file-size MP3 format, which is suitable for dissemination via the web.

Some *Skills for learning* theme music selected from 'Creative Commons' sources was added at the beginning and end of the file. We recorded a standard voice-over for the open and closing sections. These audio 'bookends' were added to all the podcasts and helped provide consistency and continuity between individual episodes.

When the podcasts were ready the website developer produced an RSS feed and access to the MP3 file. Visitors to the website are presented with various options for accessing the podcasts, such as playing them from a Flash player on the website, through iTunes, RSS or via Google Reader. Students and staff can subscribe to the podcasts and have them automatically downloaded to their computers or MP3 players when they are released.

FEEDBACK

During the academic year 2009-10 we released eight podcasts, which were listened to 2595 times; this amounts to approximately 302 hours of listening. Initially it took about ten hours of staff time to produce each one, including planning and editing, though this improved with experience. We have a feedback option on the podcast introductory webpage,⁴ but so far no one has used it. However, we do know that staff are using the podcasts in class and some are linking to them from e-learning modules. We tried them out on a group of visiting college librarians from our Regional University Network partner institutions and they gave us some useful comments which showed that assessments of this type of material can be very subjective. For example, some people objected to the background noise from the university dining area on the time management podcast, but others felt it added to the authenticity. Some podcasts featured in an interactive introduction to the *Skills for learning* website for international students, who said not only that they enjoyed them, but that they were also a useful English language listening exercise. The podcasts have also been used in other *Skills for learning* student inductions to good effect.

CONCLUSION

There is always a danger of using new technology for its own sake rather than specifically to

enhance teaching and learning. Podcasts, however, are not only simple to produce and access but the technology also offers significant benefits in providing study skills support to large numbers of students both on and off campus. Everyone involved in making the *Skills for learning* podcasts feels that the project has been very worthwhile and that we have produced something new – and useful – and judging by the number of hits, our podcasts are being well used by students. We plan to continue with the series and, in particular, we should like to make further recordings of student discussions in order to give a student perspective to complement the tutor discussions on the same topics. Making the podcasts was challenging, rewarding and an enjoyable change from our usual methods of delivering skills. Stay tuned for more *Skills for learning* podcasts!

NOTES

- 1 Leeds Metropolitan University, n.d., *Skills for learning* (website), available via <http://skillsforlearning.leedsmet.ac.uk/> [accessed 25 November 2010].
- 2 New England Skeptical Society, n.d., *The skeptics' guide to the universe* (podcast), available via <http://www.theskepticsguide.org/> [accessed 25 November 2010].
- 3 Leeds Metropolitan University, n.d., Skills for learning: *Time management* (podcast), available via <http://skillsforlearning.leedsmet.ac.uk/podcast/podcast.shtml> [accessed 25 November 2010].
- 4 Leeds Metropolitan University, n.d., Skills for Learning: *Skills for Learning podcasts* (web-page), available via <http://skillsforlearning.leedsmet.ac.uk/podcast/podcast.shtml> [accessed 25 November 2010].